

Ramen Gateway

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The scent of strange herbs and spices mixing together with cooked meat made my mouth water. My stomach gurgled a reminder of the less than appealing plane food that I had eaten during my twenty-four hour-long commute. When I found myself wishing for grilled chicken and rice pilaf, I quickly waved the thought away. The smells in the shop lead my thoughts away from America and back to the idea that I was sitting in a small ramen shop in Japan. Though I was sleep-deprived, the adrenaline from taking a giant step out of my comfort zone and into Japan kept fatigue away.

Only an hour earlier, I had been sitting on a subway car surrounded by several other American students that I didn't know. Each had looked as tired as my reflection in the long subway windows. Several of us had our cameras out in anticipation of something big happening; instead we had only taken awkward pictures of each other, strangers we knew we'd come to know well over the next four months.

We emerged from the underground in the middle of a sidewalk completely surrounded by busy roads and hundreds of compact cars. In awe, I stared at the sign for a McDonalds on the second floor of a huge building across the street, seeing it filled with giggling Japanese schoolgirls and schoolboys in uniform. What right did McDonalds have being in Japan, so far away from America? Despite my jumbled musings, though, it was a comforting thought to see familiar things like a McDonalds and great white crosswalks. Our teacher guided us across several wide crosswalks towards a hotel where we would spend our first night in Japan as tourists; after this night we would become short-term residents.

Now, I looked at my surroundings and marveled at how the ramen shop could be so ridiculously small. A group of twelve of us had set out to find the shop that our teacher had recommended, but half of them had bailed when we discovered that four of us could barely fit into the entranceway of the shop, which was the size of a large "irashaimase" rug to welcome customers. They gallivanted off to find karaoke and drinking while the other six of us remained to get our first taste of real Japanese food. Ramen seemed a tolerable option to me; it wasn't seafood and it was cooked. My main trepidation in studying abroad in Japan for an entire semester had been my lack of partiality to seafood of any kind. Ramen appeared a more and more appealing start to life in Japan with each passing second.

Crammed into the entrance of the shop, we collectively attempted to navigate the strange system of paying a machine for food and handing the corresponding ticket to the staff. I tried to employ my patchy Japanese language skills to figure out what some of the things on the menu were. In the end, I was chagrined to realize I could only read "ramen," "soba," "udon," and the Chinese character for "meat," the basics. In the end, I gave up trying to decipher anything else and figured a plain bowl of ramen would be edible. We gave our tickets to the short, friendly Japanese man who had waited patiently nearby during our endeavor. He showed us to two small four-person tables by the windowed wall of the shop and gestured for us to sit. Then, he disappeared through a doorway to the kitchen, which wasn't five feet away.

We were served our steaming ramen in a plain white bowl with a wide rim, accompanied by a strange, flat-looking spoon, which I presumed to be for drinking the broth. Dubiously, I removed the spoon from the bowl and reached for the container of wooden chopsticks on the table. Trying to break them evenly apart, I hoped it wouldn't be too difficult to learn to eat with chopsticks. They

were awkward in my fingers, but after a few minute, I could grasp them well enough to clumsily attempt to pick up some of the things in my bowl.

Numerous things made it obvious that packaged ramen in America is nothing but a pale imitation of its parent dish. In my bowl, half of a hard-boiled egg floated atop a sea of noodles, which were mostly hidden by the milky nature of the broth. A slice of pork with the fat still attached, since the Japanese don't believe in removing any kind of fat from meat, floated next to the egg. Bits of green onion garnished the dish, adding the perfect tang to the broth that gave the ramen its distinct Japanese flavor. The entire presentation of ramen reflected the Japanese aesthetic of making their meals look exemplary. Admittedly, the plain noodles and a package of flavoring that make up American ramen clearly fell short of this exquisitely prepared bowl. I thought of the plastic packaging with the bright orange edges declaring the "chicken flavor" that I had so often eaten during the cold months in Michigan and wondered how it could have originated from this beautifully presented bowl in front of me.

The egg I removed carefully with the strange spoon and pawned off on one of new friends; sadly, food allergies are one thing that can't be left behind in another country. I picked up the pork in my inexpertly handled chopsticks and took a bite. It was juicy and tender, practically dissolving in my mouth. It was pork in a way I'd never eaten it in America, but still pork that I knew and loved. When I dug down into the noodles next, they were soft and swollen with broth. The taste of the broth itself was smoky, almost bitter. This smoky, bitter taste was the one that identified this broth as the one made specifically for ramen, never to be used for udon or soba.

At first it was strange and I ate slowly. But the taste grew on me and I quickly ate until there was nothing but broth left. Across the walkway at the long bar set against the wall and the kitchen wall, two Japanese business men ate their noodles noisily, slurping as was their custom. Looking at my remaining broth, I decided I didn't mind being an American for now and eating noiselessly.

As I finished my broth, I placed the chopsticks across the top of the bowl and sat back to look at the room. What had been at first confining was now friendly and quaint. The walls were lined with pieces of paper advertising the different dishes the shop had to offer, written in characters I couldn't understand; the characters, however, were pleasing to simply look at. Some of the papers closer to the kitchen would flutter every now and then as the result of the movement of air created by busy cooks. Through a small window to the kitchen I could see the workers scurrying around each other; occasionally they would look out at us to make sure they weren't being summoned for service. In contrast, the tall buildings outside loomed blackly in the night, illuminated from behind by the lights of the bustling city center beyond. Having grown up in an area where my high school was neighbor to a cow farm, I could only imagine how easy it would be to get lost out there, but I felt no fear. Instead, I felt excitement gurgle in my stomach with the ramen I had just finished.

My new friends and I stood up and filed out of the shop into the warm March air. We shared stories of where we had come from; and, as we wandered back towards the hotel through the narrow streets of Japan, I didn't realize we had just started a story of what was to come.